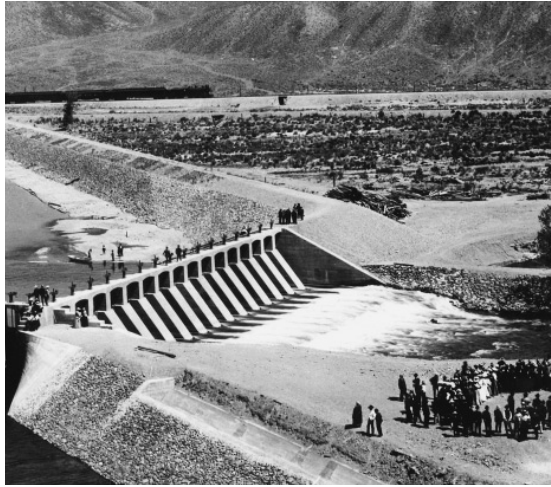


Congressional party gathered in a circle during speeches at the opening of Truckee-Carson project at head of main Truckee-Canal.



is concentrated in the history and public affairs staff of Reclamation, and the cultural resources management staff at the Bureau recently began exploring options for appropriate activities.

The history publications proposed for the centennial have broad applications within Reclamation for management, environmental statement, and CRM applications and are being considered for development primarily because of their usefulness to Reclamation. Because of the early recognition of Reclamation's pending 100-year anniversary the bureau was able to fund relatively large research projects in manageable increments over a period of years. In addition, a small celebratory publication on Reclamation's future will include statements from selected political figures and water users.

As Reclamation's management and staff become increasingly aware of the upcoming centennial, we anticipate that new projects and activities will develop at all levels of the Bureau.

*Brit Allan Storey, Ph.D., is the Senior Historian for the Bureau of Reclamation.*

---

Roger D. Launius

## The 2003 Centennial of Flight Aerospace Historians and the Challenge of Commemoration

---

**H**ave you ever stood on a railroad track and seen a freight train in the distance, whistle blowing and diesel wailing, rumbling directly toward you at high speed? That is how I feel when I contemplate the December 17, 2003, centennial of the first flight of the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. The centennial commemoration of the Wright's first tentative powered flights and the beginning of a century of flight in both air and space seems to be inescapable. Equal parts of enthusiasm and dread animate many of those interested in the development of flight in America at the prospect of this centennial. The communities we serve seemed thrilled with commemorations in general and the 100th anniversary of flight is tailor-made for hoopla, historicism, and perhaps hysteria.<sup>1</sup>

Since this is the case, cultural resource managers, interpreters, scholars, and community members in the field must leap aboard the centennial train and help to drive it. Not to do so, I fear, will lead to being run over by it. As a public historian

specializing in flight, I want to use the centennial to accomplish worthwhile objectives not otherwise attainable because of the lack of resources, interest, or resolve.

This may not be easy. The 2003 centennial of flight shows signs of being transformed from an educational and civic opportunity into something that has little to do with furthering historical understanding. Various organizations, companies, and individuals are seeking to turn a handsome profit on memorabilia and tourism. The descendants of Wilbur and Orville Wright, for instance, have licensed the use of the name and the brothers' photographs for commercial purposes.

Additionally, the Congress has just passed legislation to create a Centennial of Flight Commission at the national level.<sup>2</sup> In the fall of 1997, members from the House and the Senate introduced the Centennial of Flight Commemoration Act, which resolved that "it is appropriate to celebrate and commemorate the centennial year through local, national, and international observances and activities."

To plan and assist in centennial events, the bill establishes a commission that includes administrators of NASA and the Federal Aviation Administration; the Director of the National Air and Space Museum; the chairperson of the First Flight Centennial Commission in North Carolina; the president of the First Flight Centennial Foundation; and an advisory committee with representatives from many other organizations.

The Centennial of Flight Commission is charged with:

- Planning and developing programs and activities that are appropriate to commemorate the 100th anniversary of powered flight.
- Assisting in conducting educational, civic, and commemorative activities related to the centennial of powered flight throughout the United States.
- Providing national coordination for celebration dates to take place throughout the United States during the centennial year.

The Centennial Commissions charter could provide a framework to accomplish several related ends connected to the three broad goals of collecting, preserving, and disseminating the history of flight.

Those of us in the federal agencies who are heavily involved in flight— NASA, the FAA, the Air Force, etc.— are already collecting preserving, and disseminating the history of flight as part of the centennial observance. For instance, we are making special efforts to collect the papers of organizations and individuals related to flight to ensure their availability for future historians. The downsizing of the aerospace industry in the 1990s, especially through corporate mergers and divestiture of aerospace operations from corporate giants, places the archival sources of this important and dynamic sector of the economy at risk. A permanent repository for these documents is needed. Equally important are the oral histories of key personnel involved in the development of flight. The cen-

nial provides an opportunity to collect these before they pass from the scene.

As part of the effort to preserve historic aerospace sources, artifacts, sites, and places, we are beginning to flesh out several possible projects for the centennial of flight, among them the following:

- **Union List of Aerospace Artifacts.** This project would create, probably on the World Wide Web, a master list of aerospace artifacts and their location, condition, and availability for trade for all museums wanting artifacts for collections.
- **Historic Airplane and Spacecraft Restoration Project.** There are many historical flying vehicles that are in dire need of restoration or they will be lost in a few years. This effort would assess those craft and their relative merit and seek to acquire resources for their preservation.
- **Workshops for Aircraft Restoration.** A set of seminars conducted at leading aerospace museums aimed at presenting those with artifacts of the most useful methods of restoration and preservation.

This is not an exclusive set of possibilities. The projects are among several under active consideration by centennial planners.

We all have war stories about commemorative events turned sour, and there are pitfalls with this one to be sure, but there are also possibilities. Our pro-activity in turning them to our advantage will probably mean the difference between helping to drive the train coming toward us or being run over by it. I much prefer the first of these two options. The more concrete efforts that can be put into place before that inevitable day when senior leaders ask what is being done for the centennial of flight, the greater likelihood of concentrating efforts on projects useful for the preservation of resources related to flight and the expansion of historical knowledge about flight and its social effects.

#### Notes

- 1 David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: Free Press, 1996). Lowenthal argues that we are in the midst of a worldwide nostalgia craze that has a fundamental heritage component.
- 2 The details of the legislation are drawn from the bill, S 1397, 105th Congress, 1st session, "Centennial of Flight Commemoration Act," introduced in the Senate on November 1997, by Jesse Helms (R-NC), John Glenn (D-OH), et al.

Roger D. Launius, Ph.D., is Chief Historian of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Washington, DC.

Orville and Wilbur Wright conducted the first flight on December 17, 1903. Photo courtesy NPS.

